

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2007

Members of the 2006-2007 Human Rights Commission (HRC) have experienced a range of opportunities to accommodate the needs of Amherst's citizens. As a commission we have participated in activities that required the patience and sensitivities necessary to achieve satisfying results to various citizens and organizations for the Town of Amherst.

In the early part of the year we conceived a plan of community conversations that would be a collaborative project with the Amherst Clergy Council. The chair met once with the Council, introduced the project, and brought the findings back to the Commission. A sub-committee planned a series of films designed to stimulate discussions surrounding issues of social justice or civil rights, with all the parishes being involved throughout the year. This project will manifest itself throughout the coming year.

There were two complaints presented to the Commission: de facto racial discrimination in hiring among non-school and non-library Town positions; and a complaint, along with a petition, about the lack of racial and ethnic minorities in the regional schools. The petition was signed by several Amherst parents and citizens. The Chair and the Director met with Jere Hochman, Superintendent of Schools, and Kathy Mazur, to obtain data with a breakdown of school employees by race and ethnicity.

Maria Popstefanija, regional epidemiologist, presented a power point discussion of the plans to control and minimize influenza illness in Western Massachusetts. The power point covered the history of past epidemics, including the pandemic of 1917-18; plans and strategies for the care of annual winter influenza; plans to outreach to groups where there are generally health disparities; and finally the concerns and differences of a more deadly avian flu pandemic.

Commissioner Frank Gatti and his wife, Ellie, traveled to Iran in May. The Human Rights Commission co-sponsored, with Grace Episcopal Church, a power point presentation of their trip.

On December 10th, the Commission, in collaboration with SAGE, presented the Annual Candle Light reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in front of Town Hall. And on December 14th, the HRC presented a forum on civil liberties and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Bruce Miller, who teaches constitutional law and law on terrorism at Western New England Law School. Mr. Miller spoke about the Military Commission Act of 2006, which indirectly authorizes torture of alleged terrorist detainees. Joseph Wronka, a professor of Social Work at Springfield College and principal investigator of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights project at the Heller School of Social Policy at Brandeis University, discussed the interdependence of the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A community issue regarding broadcast programming deficits of Latino, issues such as WFCR's Tertulia, was brought before the Commission. Numerous meetings and deliberations were held to request re-instatement of broadcast times from only four hours per week. Additionally, a Spring Town Meeting warrant article was crafted to form a community board to help in the future programming at WFCR. This was partly supported by the following:

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

The Commission received information in March concerning an anti-gay incident on the UMass campus. Careful monitoring of administrative action/reaction ensued. The HRC did not receive a written complaint; therefore no other action resulted.

The HRC reviewed the job description for the Personnel Director's position sent to us by the Town Manager as it pertained to the HRC Director's current and future career path. This was of particular concern if the new position was to leave the HRC Director's position professionally uncovered or, worse, minimally supported. The possibility of volunteers in this position was carefully and thoroughly discussed by the Commissioners. We determined that such was not in the best interest of the community since confidential matters would not be protected.

The situation in Darfur had been constantly monitored by Co-Chair Commissioner Ahmed, and Chair and main contact of the Darfur Coalition, Reynolds Winslow, which met monthly. Updates of the progress and lack thereof were brought to our own monthly meetings. Ms Ahmed and spouse Mohammed, a former Commissioner, are both from the Sudan, enabling us to be emphatically concerned. Fanny Rothschild, local human rights activists and Mohammed Elighadi, attended the HRC meeting and updated us on the situation in Darfur.

The Commission took great interest in the early discussions concerning the formation of an African Heritage School for the area. It would have been designed around an African-American centric philosophy and teaching focus. An African-Scholars Program was projected for this curriculum. The project was abandoned after an unsuccessful search for adequate resources.

In March, immigrant issues were prominent in the news and Commissioners maintained an awareness of the deportation issues for undocumented members of many families. New Bedford, Massachusetts was under close scrutiny as we perceived that human rights were being abrogated there. At the same time, Grace Church, which was equally concerned, presented an evening presentation for the community and involved many parishioners in the support effort.

March also brought to light New York and Los Angeles school issues regarding degrading treatment, discrimination, and discipline by instructors. This was particularly important since several Amherst groups and Commissioners have similar concerns about conditions in the Amherst schools and wish to see if there are problems and solutions mutually applicable concerning students of color; we are continuing this effort.

Once again, the Declaration of Human Rights Principles became of major interest to us. The issues that surrounded the Massachusetts Health Care Plan for local residents caused us to be mindful of families unable to afford this necessary, systemic benefit.

Phone mapping became an issue we shared with many – the ability to type a home phone number into the computer, only to have a map appear locating the dwelling. Please refer to <http://www.google.com> to remedy your own situation if needed or desired.

A complaint was brought to the Commission regarding the imminent closing of the Town pools to LSSE, due to budget cuts reducing summer personnel to manage them. The Director of LSSE shared the dilemma and was persuasive enough to spur discussions about how to improve the outlook and to provide these needed summer recreational opportunities for low-income children affected by the reduction of subsidized pool fees. Town Meeting eventually funded a delayed opening of the pools.

The Chair and Director presented to the Select Board the case for requesting Special Municipal Employee (SME) status to enable current and future Commissioners (considered Town employees by law) to professionally represent a client on another committee or commission of the Town. The request was approved.

Planning for the Amherst Community Gathering Potluck commenced in April as a major collaborative to bring the community together. The event, conceived by the local NAACP, involved an expanded number of endorsers: Amherst Education Foundation, Vision Keepers, SAGE, League of Women Voters, Amherst-Bay Saint Louis Sister City Committee, Sojourner Truth Committee, Study Circles, LSSE, NAACP and the Human Rights Commission. This fifth annual event, held this year on June 16th at Mill River Park, was attended by 80-100 persons and continues to grow. The HRC selected 18 students from Amherst's schools for the 'Heroism Award' and presented each with a book gift and a framed certificate. Please see the website developed for the celebration: <http://www.amherstpotluck.com/> for a few photos of the festivities and how you might become stimulated to join as an endorser and/or attendee.

Finally, plans for the HRC Annual Retreat commenced in April. A facilitator was employed and successfully helped us toward the development of a 2007-2008 HRC Activity Plan. This remarkable feat will help us focus on advancing greater effectiveness and assistance to the needs of our citizens and on how the group will operate and increase the visibility of the Commission to the community. We were unanimous in agreement that this new covenant was critically important to us as Commissioners and to the community we serve.

Human Rights Director

The Human Rights Director completed the Amherst Survival Center investigation and submitted recommendations to the ASC, Town Manager, and the Human Development Committee, which resulted in the hiring of a consultant and a complete overhaul of the ASC. A new director was hired, and an almost completely new board of directors was appointed. During the transition, complaints were continually filed and I worked closely with the new director to resolve them.

Other than the complaints received from ASC, I also addressed over 50 complaints/requests from citizens and Town employees and received an average of over 25-30 calls per month regarding alleged civil right violations, fielded inquiries, consultations, and other administration issues, and provided information and referrals.

In addition to dealing with general human rights issues, I also completed a self-evaluation and a Transition Plan for the Town of Amherst through a CDBG grant to bring the Town into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1995.

In preparation for added responsibility as Human Rights/Resources Director and personal development, I attended a series of Train the Trainer Trainings through MCAD (Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination) to become certified as a discrimination trainer. I also attended a seminar on “How to Work with Difficult People”; I also attended, and participated in, the Annual Black Leaders Community Development Conference.

In addition to the responsibilities listed above, I am also the staff representative on the Amherst Katrina Committee. The committee is organizing to bring 10 artists from Mississippi to Amherst on the weekend of September 29th to display their art work at the Apple Harvest Festival. A series of events are being organized as fund raisers for these artists, whose homes and livelihood were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the time, energy, dedication, and support of the Human Rights Commission, and the support of Town officials.

Respectfully submitted,

Eunice Torres, Human Rights Director
Reynolds Winslow, Human Rights Commission Chair